

HEBREW FICTION

What lies beneath

In recreating forgotten Palestine, Alon Hilu raises questions about the future of the region and its peoples

Ahuzat dajani (*La Maison Dajani*),
by Alon Hilu, Yedioth Books (Hebrew), 267 pages, NIS 88

By Shira Stav

It has taken 60 years and one “Dionysus at Dizengoff Center” (the masterpiece by Tamar Berger) for Alon Hilu’s “Ahuzat dajani” (“La Maison Dajani”) to be written. The achievement is not only political, historical and scholarly in terms of its research – it is also one of literary, stylistic and linguistic proportions. This is not to say that it is a perfect book, but even its failures are splendid.

Alon Hilu, author of “The Death of a Monk” (2004), a novel that dealt with the Damascus Blood Libel of 1840, has chosen to return to a key (and pretty much ignored) juncture in history: Palestine at the end of the 19th century and during the First Aliyah, the wave of Jewish immigration that lasted from 1882 to 1903. The book is written as two alternating journals. The first is the diary of Salah, a gifted and depressive Arab boy who grows up alone under the care of two women – his mother Afifa and the servant Amina, while his father is traveling all over the world. The character of Salah, who suffers from prophetic hallucinations and suicidal thoughts, is a combination of Scheherazade, the tireless storyteller, and Cassandra, the prophetess of the destruction of Troy, whose precise predictions no one believed.

The other diary is that of a real-life figure, Haim Margalio Kalvarisky, a First Aliyah agronomist, who purchased plots of land from Arab effendis and expelled their tenant farmers, but who was also one of the founders of Brit Shalom, which aspired to reconcile Jews and Arabs. Kalvarisky’s journal documents his first days in Palestine, with his cold and uncooperative wife, and describes his encounter with the natives of the land and especially with Salah, his mother and their piece of land, which he covets.

The two interwoven journals juxtapose the Jewish and Arab narratives as two different views of the same reality, so that the reader finds himself deliberating between two versions of the same events. At first, one leans toward Kalvarisky, while Salah comes across as a hallucinatory and mentally disturbed youngster. Gradually, however, the tables are turned: Salah seems more credible, whereas Kalvarisky emerges as a cunning individual who denies his own craftiness.

Stereotype reversal

A large basis for our increasing sympathy for Salah derives from the reversal of stereotypes about Jews and Arabs. The following is what Kalvarisky thinks of Salah: “For he is a Jew to some extent, in the seriousness of his speech, in the paleness of his face, in his weak hands that have never even known the whittling of a branch with a pocketknife.” Salah is, in effect, the Arab embodiment of the figure of the feminized, scholarly Diaspora Jew who is divorced from reality.

In Salah’s eyes, by way of contrast,

Kalvarisky is perceived as a blond, blue-eyed Aryan who excels at manual labor. The relationship between the two depicts the Jewish-Arab conflict as a long saga of relations of fierce love and vengeful hatred, mutual passion, dependency and deception. The characters of the Jew and the Arab are built on quite a clear theoretical foundation: the perception of Zionism as a colonialist project; the metaphor of the land as a woman; criticism of Orientalism (a la Edward Said) and the establishment of a new, masculine and firm Jewish body on the ruins of the body of the Diaspora Jew.

A visit to the author’s Web site makes it clear that the number of books Hilu used as theoretical background for writing the novel could easily have served as the bibliography for a master’s thesis. There will be those who note this to the detriment of the book, as though it were a schematic adaptation of popular theories, but I believe the opposite is true: Hilu has plowed deeply. The strong effect of his writing does not derive only from his new look at events of the past, but also and mainly from the way in which he compels us to think anew about today’s political reality and its bleak future.

The book’s major strength lies in the way the reader’s view, which is sent far back into the past, intersects with Salah’s prophetic view, which predicts the distant future. The reader is forced to imagine the early landscapes of late-19th-century Palestine; to do so, he must strip Tel Aviv of its concrete and imagine the geological strata buried beneath. He is compelled to see Wadi Musrara flowing in its streambed, the Muslim cemetery on the beach and the bustling streets of Arab Jaffa and the Dajani estate, where the Azrieli Towers stand today. This exercise in guided imagination, in which Hilu makes his readers participate, is in effect real political activism.

The reader is forced to imagine the early landscapes of Palestine at the end of the 19th century; to do so, he must strip Tel Aviv of its concrete and imagine the geological stratum buried beneath.

The reader’s gaze, which probes deeply into the soil of this country, intersects the prophetic gaze of the youngster Salah, who predicts the Palestinian Nakba (catastrophe of 1948) and the destruction of Arab life: “And I see in my mind all the prophecies that have been given about this land, about streams that will fill up with filth and refuse, about the orchards that will be uprooted and covered in stones and mortar, about villages that will disappear from sight, and this seems to me so unlikely, because before my eyes the farmers are industriously cultivating their lands and the sun in the sky is there with all its potency and the trees cling to a tangle of many roots and everything is well in its place, holding on there for all eternity.”

Salah’s sense that it is not possible that things will change so drastically, that the world that is familiar to him will be de-

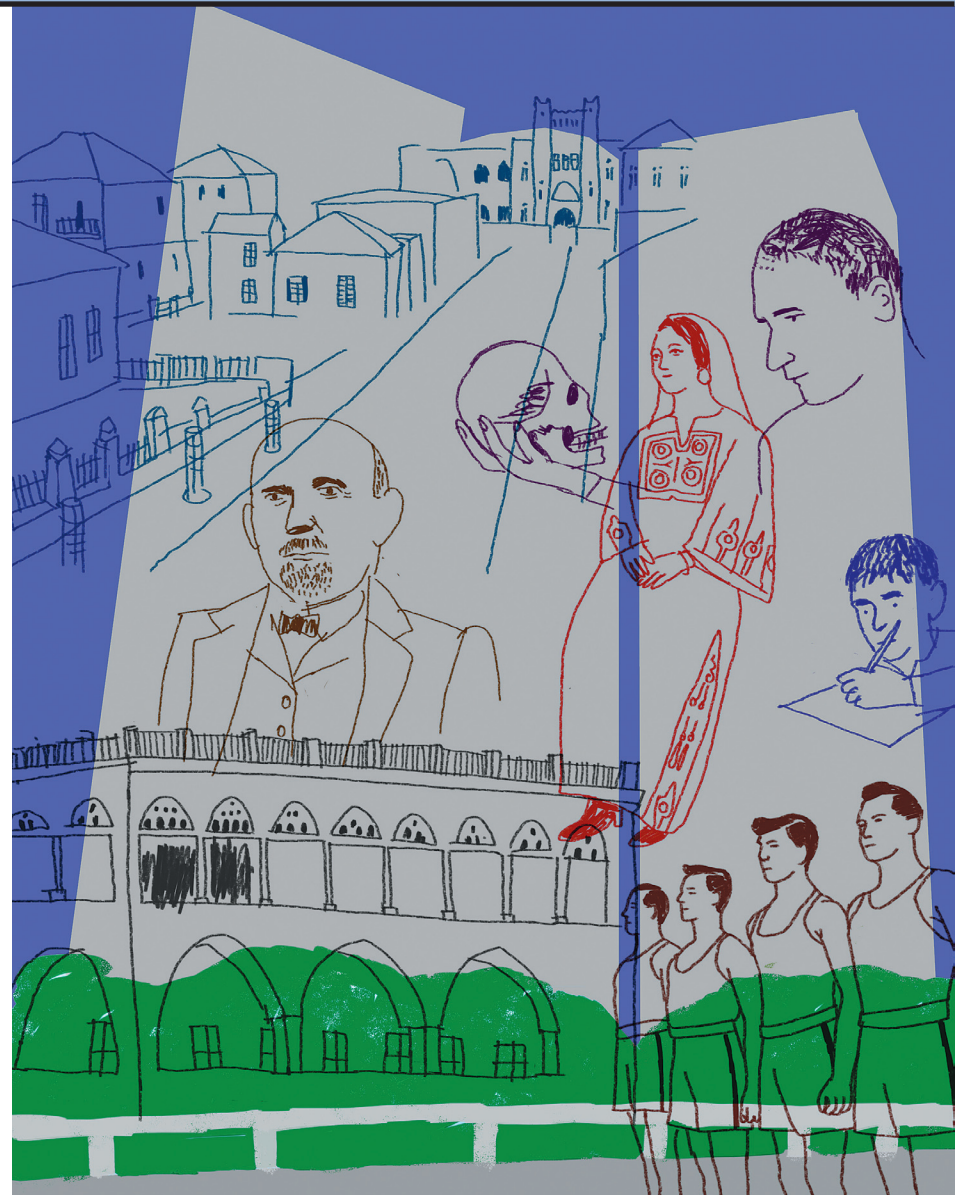


Illustration by Michal Bonano

stroyed to its foundations is familiar to the reader. Thus, the collision between Salah’s perspective and our own perspective engenders an acute sense of temporariness – not only the temporariness of Palestine but the temporariness of the State of Israel. Our gaze that is sent back 110 years cannot help but shoot ahead 110 years, as we wonder whether what we see here today will last.

Just as the landscape of the story is built on two superimposed levels – the village past and the urban present – so the literary act is constructed intentionally, as “second-story literature,” as the rewriting of existing stories and styles. As such, this book is a masterpiece of a rich and lush

linguistic tapestry: Kalvarisky’s enchanting language is a stunning imitation of the Hebrew of the period of the beginning of modern Jewish settlement and the days of Eliezer Ben Yehuda.

An unconvincing argument

Often other Zionist writers, from Naftali Hertz Imber through Joseph Haim Brenner to Naomi Shemer, infiltrate these monologues – and they add much to the book. The surprisingly comical language enables the reader to rethink the internal blindness inherent in Israel’s self-perception today: How can a people that occupies and disinherits continue to see itself as a model of morality and peace-seeking, and even be insulted by the fact that the dis-inherited are not grateful for the fact of their occupation?

Salah’s language has a tragic dimension. It is written in a decorative, Arabesque manner and built on the formula of Arab folktales – above all, Haroun al Rashid from “A Thousand and One Nights.” I recently read the comments of a well-known literary critic who in her review complained that Salah was not believable, because a 10-year-old boy could not express himself at such a high linguistic level. This argument is flawed, because it assumes that what we have before us is a realistic novel. However, Salah, like Kalvarisky, is not a psychologically mimetic character who imitates a flesh-and-blood human, but rather a fantastic character, who imitates a language.

Thus, what is to the detriment of the book is not its language, but rather its psychological plot, which in contrast to the fabric of its language is sewn together with rather crude seams. The story of Salah and Kalvarisky is almost a precise copy of the classic Shakespearean plot: Kalvarisky is Claudius, Afifa Dajani is Gertrude (and also Lady Macbeth), Salah, of course, is Hamlet, the eternal ditherer who hesitates to avenge his father’s death, but he is also the discarded Ophelia who mourns the bitterness of her love. Even Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern appear here as a pair of homosexual Arab opportunists.

Although Hilu has changed the usual psychological interpretation of Hamlet and has endowed it with the unexpected twist of a homoerotic attraction (to the stepfather), I believe the connection to Shakespeare is not sufficiently complex and interesting. The novel remains schematic, and the text is restricted rather than enriched. There is a certain pleasure in identifying the points of contact but after a while, they become too predictable and transparent – almost tiresome. Fortunately, that does not suffice to spoil this fascinating, wise, enjoyable and important book.

Shira Stav teaches in the Hebrew literature department of Ben-Gurion University of the Negev.